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From: Ludwigsen, Emily
Sent: Tue 8/11/2015 3:12:34 PM
Subject: CO Spill - Clips 8/11

From 8/10 6pm and onward

Associated Press (2), Christian Science Monitor, CNN, The Guardian, Inquisitr, NBC News (3), New York Times, Reuters, Time, TV Newsroom, Wall Street Journal

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Associated Press (via ABC News)

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/officials-downstream-colorado-mine-spill-demand-answers-33005658>

Officials Downstream From Colorado Mine Spill Demand Answers

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN and ELLEN KNICKMEYER

Aug 11, 2015, 4:19 AM ET

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Local officials in towns downstream from where millions of gallons of mine waste spilled into a southwest Colorado river are demanding answers about possible long-term threats to the water supply.

Colorado and New Mexico declared stretches of the Animas and San Juan rivers to be disaster areas as the orange-colored waste stream made its way downstream toward Lake Powell in Utah after the spill Wednesday at the abandoned Gold King mine near Silverton, Colorado.

The 3 million gallons of mine waste included high concentrations of arsenic, lead and other heavy metals. Workers with the EPA accidentally unleashed the spill as they inspected the abandoned mine site.

EPA officials said Monday that there was no leading edge of contamination visible in downstream sections of the San Juan River or Lake Powell. But that has done little to ease concerns or quell the anger caused by the spill.

The Navajo Nation, which covers parts of New Mexico, Utah and Arizona, declared an emergency as it shut down water intake systems and stopped diverting water from the San Juan River.

Members of the tribal council were frustrated during a special meeting Monday and echoed the sentiment of New Mexico and Utah officials that the federal government needs to be held accountable.

Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes discussed the legal implications with his New Mexico counterpart, Hector Balderas, and planned to hold a similar call with Colorado Attorney General Cynthia Coffman, Reyes' office said Monday.

"We hope to work with our sister states to ensure our citizens are protected and whatever remediation is necessary occurs as quickly as possible," Reyes said in a statement. "We will continue to evaluate the legal issues as we receive data and monitor the effects on our communities."

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Utah Gov. Gary Herbert said the governor is disappointed in the EPA's initial handling of the spill but the state has no plans for legal action.

The EPA has said the contaminants were rolling too fast to be an immediate health threat.

Experts and federal environmental officials say they expect the river system to dilute the heavy metals before they pose a longer-term threat.

The EPA said stretches of the rivers would be closed for drinking water, recreation and other uses at least through Aug. 17.

Dissolved iron in the waste turned the long plume an alarming orange-yellow — a look familiar to old-time miners who call it "yellow boy" — so "the water appears worse aesthetically than it actually is, in terms of health," said Ron Cohen, a civil and environmental engineering professor at the Colorado School of Mines.

Tests show some of the metals have settled to the bottom and would dissolve only if conditions became acidic, which isn't likely, Cohen said.

The best course for the EPA would be to leave the metals where they settle, he said, noting that next spring's mountain snowmelt would help dilute the contaminants further and flush them downstream.

No die-off of wildlife along the river has yet been detected. Federal officials say all but one of a test batch of fingerling trout deliberately exposed to the water survived over the weekend.

As a precaution, state and federal officials along the river system have ordered public water systems to turn off intake valves as the plume passes. Boaters and fishing groups have been told to avoid affected stretches of the Animas and San Juan rivers, which are crowded with rafters and anglers in a normal summer.

Recreational businesses along the rivers said they were losing thousands of dollars.

"We had lots of trips booked. Right now we're just canceling by the day," said Drew Beezley, co-owner of 4 Corners Whitewater in Durango, Colorado.

He said his company has had to cancel 20 rafting trips so far, and his dozen employees are out of work until the river is deemed safe to enter again.

"We don't really know what the future holds yet," said Beezley, who estimates that he's lost about \$10,000 worth of business since the spill last week. "We don't know if the rest of this season is just scrapped."

The EPA has considered adding a section of the Animas River in Colorado as a Superfund cleanup site at least since the 1990s because heavy metals from Gold King and other defunct mines were killing fish and other species.

The designation would have brought federal clean-up funds, but some in Colorado opposed the move in part because of the stigma attached. The EPA agreed to allow local officials to lead clean-up efforts instead.

Associated Press (via WECT Channel 6):

<http://www.wect.com/story/29751297/the-latest-well-water-tested-after-colorado-mine-spill>

The Latest: Spill prompts New Mexico to declare emergency

By Associated Press

4:25 p.m.

New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez has declared an emergency that frees up state funds to address a massive spill of wastewater from a Colorado mine into the Animas and San Juan

rivers.

Federal officials say more than 3 million gallons of water tainted with lead, arsenic and other heavy metals contaminated the rivers following last week's spill.

Martinez on Monday said she was heartbroken and called it an environmental catastrophe.

She joined other officials in criticizing the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for its lack of communication and transparency after a cleanup crew supervised by the EPA accidentally breached a debris dam at the old mine in southwest Colorado on Wednesday.

Under the governor's order, \$750,000 in state funds will be available for well testing, long-term studies and other efforts.

The amount is in addition to \$500,000 in emergency funds the New Mexico Environment Department requested and received Friday.

3:25 p.m.

The head of the New Mexico Environment Department is calling out federal officials for not quickly notifying the state of a toxic wastewater spill from an abandoned Colorado mine.

Environment Secretary Ryan Flynn said Monday that there was no question the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency did not respond as quickly as it should have and must be held accountable.

A cleanup crew supervised by the EPA accidentally breached a debris dam at the old mine in southwest Colorado on Wednesday.

Flynn says New Mexico will stand with the Navajo Nation to ensure the EPA compensates everyone in the Four Corners region who has been affected by the spill.

The EPA released a statement Monday saying it was sharing information as quickly as possible with the public as its experts evaluate any effects of the spill.

The 3-million gallon spill contains lead, arsenic and other heavy metals. It affected the Animas and San Juan rivers in Colorado and New Mexico before reaching Utah.

Initial testing for heavy metals showed the levels may be high. Flynn says the EPA has agreed to do more comprehensive testing and needs to show it's committed to a long-term cleanup effort.

2:35 p.m.

People are getting their well water tested in northwestern New Mexico after a plume of contaminated water spilled from a Colorado mine into the Animas River.

The New Mexico Environment Department partnered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to begin testing the water Monday.

The agencies are hoping to get a better understanding of the general quality of well water throughout the area.

The state has identified more than 1,100 domestic wells within 1.5 miles of the Animas and San Juan rivers.

Officials in San Juan County also are warning residents not to use river water. Water stations have been set up around the county where residents can fill up containers and get clean water for their livestock.

Donations of bottled water were coming in and the American Red Cross was working to get water to homeless people who live along the river and depend on it for bathing.

Shower facilities were also opened up for residents in need at the San Juan County fairgrounds.

In Utah, Cynthia Sequanna, a spokeswoman for Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, says the park has started warning visitors to avoid drinking, swimming or boating on affected stretches of the San Juan River and Lake Powell until further notice.

2:15 p.m.

Recreational businesses that depend on a Colorado river affected by a mine wastewater spill say they're losing thousands of dollars.

Drew Beezley is co-owner of 4 Corners Whitewater in Durango. He said Monday his company has cancelled 20 rafting trips on the Animas River so far. His 12 employees are out of work until the river is deemed safe to enter again.

Beezley says he's lost about \$10,000 worth of business since the spill last week - and during what promised to be a good rafting year because of heavy snowmelt.

Wild Rivers Expeditions, a river rafting company in Bluff, Utah, says they've lost about \$7,000 in business after customers cancelled rafting trips over worries about heavy metal-laden wastewater making its way to the San Juan River in southern Utah.

On Wednesday, a cleanup crew supervised by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency accidentally breached a debris dam at an old mine, releasing 3 million gallons of wastewater that contains arsenic, lead and other heavy metals.

1:40 p.m.

Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper has issued a disaster declaration after millions of gallons of contaminated water spilled from a mine into the Animas River and was making its way to Lake Powell in Utah.

The declaration on Monday releases \$500,000 to assist businesses and towns affected by the 3-million-gallon spill that contains heavy metals including lead and arsenic.

It also helps pay for water quality sampling by the state, assessing impacts on fish and wildlife, and any possible cleanup.

Hickenlooper directed state agencies to seek federal funds or low-interest loans to help entities affected by the spill.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has yet to say if the metals pose a threat to human health, frustrating residents in Colorado and downstream in New Mexico and Utah.

On Wednesday, an EPA-supervised cleanup crew accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside Colorado's Gold King Mine, which has been inactive since 1923.

1:15 p.m.

Farms along the Animas and San Juan river valleys in New Mexico have no water to irrigate their crops after a massive spill from a closed Colorado mine.

A family farm in Cedar Hill, New Mexico, that serves as many as 3,000 customers in the Four Corners region has been without water since some 3 million gallons of contaminated water spilled from the Gold King Mine last week.

D'rese Sutherland says if it doesn't rain by the weekend, 80 acres of chile, pumpkins and other produce will be in jeopardy at Sutherland Farms.

Members of New Mexico's congressional delegation sent a letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Monday, asking that the agency develop a comprehensive plan for addressing those communities, farms and ranches that are without water.

The letter states the lack of water is already taking a toll on residents and their livelihoods.

12:30 p.m.

Colorado authorities say there are no reports yet of harm to wildlife in that state five days after the release of millions of gallons of heavy metal-laden wastewater from a mine into the Animas River.

The state's Parks and Wildlife agency said Monday it had inserted cages with more than 100 fingerling trout into the river in southwest Colorado near Durango.

The fish are sensitive to changes in water quality. As of Monday, only one fish had died, but the agency said it didn't know if that was because of the metals in the water.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has yet to say if the metals, which include lead and arsenic, pose a threat to human health, frustrating residents and state and local officials in Colorado and downstream in New Mexico and Utah.

About 3 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling on Wednesday when an EPA-supervised cleanup crew accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine.

The mine has been inactive since 1923.

12:05 p.m.

Tribal officials with the Navajo Nation have declared an emergency as a massive plume of contaminated wastewater from an abandoned Colorado mine flows downstream toward Lake Powell, which supplies much of the water to the Southwest.

State environment officials in New Mexico and Utah say the plume is passing through the Navajo Nation and headed toward Montezuma Creek near the town of Bluff, a tourist destination.

Some drinking water systems on the Navajo Nation, which spans parts of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah, have shut down their intake systems and stopped diverting water from the San Juan River.

Drinking water was being hauled to some communities.

Navajo President Russell Begaye says the tribe is frustrated with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and he plans to take legal action. An EPA supervised crew has been blamed for causing the spill while attempting to clean up the area.

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Christian Science Monitor

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<http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2015/0810/Animas-River-spill-How-Colorado-s-Gold-Medal-waters-turned-mustard>

Animas River spill: How Colorado's 'Gold Medal' waters turned mustard

Pete Spotts

August 10,

The EPA's accidental release of 3 million gallons of contaminated water into the Animas River may provide a 'Cuyahoga River moment' in the region's struggle to deal with water pollution from abandoned hard-rock mines.

In 1999, a two-mile stretch of the Animas River, near Durango, Colo., garnered the state's top award issued for trout-friendly, cold-water habitats. But five days ago, these "Gold Medal" waters turned mustard, as a pulse of more than 3 million gallons of contaminated water poured in from an abandoned mine upstream.

The incident occurred as federal environmental workers were moving earth to try to control underground water levels to prevent just such an outcome.

The stunning event may provide a Cuyahoga River moment in the region's long-running struggle to deal with water pollution from abandoned hard-rock mines.

At least that's the hope some environment groups and researchers in the region express as sediment-laden waste water from the Gold King Mine, near Silverton, Colo., flowed south, then west toward an eventual merger with the Colorado River at Lake Powell.

In 1969, the Cuyahoga River became a highly visible symbol of the nation's water pollution problems after its oily surface caught fire and torched a railroad bridge as it wound its way through Cleveland. Images of a river on fire helped propel landmark federal environmental laws, including the Clean Water Act.

The water burst from the Gold King Mine Aug. 5, as the US Environmental Protection Agency was working to control rising water levels inside the mine.

The ensuing flow of polluted water down Cement Creek and into the Animas River has been painful to watch, notes Judith Kohler, spokeswoman for the National Wildlife Federation office in Denver.

For Colorado and much of the western United States, the fouling of Cement Creek and the Animas River "might be a great teaching moment" regarding pollution from abandoned mines, she says.

The water contained lead, cadmium, arsenic, copper, manganese, and iron at levels substantially higher than state water quality standards define as acceptable, according to EPA measurements taken the day after the blowout.

More than 20,000 abandoned mines burrow into Colorado mountainsides, notes Mark Williams, a geographer at the University of Colorado at Boulder who specializes in alpine hydrology and has worked with the EPA on issues related to polluted water from abandoned mines.

One study he and colleagues conducted found that 1,400 miles of streams in the state failed to meet the EPA's water quality standards for wildlife because of mine contamination.

The West as a whole sports some 500,000 abandoned mines, which "all have problems," although the potential for King Gold Mine-size leaks varies, Dr. Williams says.

And where acidic mine drainage might not have been a significant problem for people in the past, that is changing.

Almost all of the West's abandoned mines are high up on mountainsides, giving leaks nowhere to go but down. In Colorado, for instance, most of the valuable minerals are found at elevations between 9,000 and 12,000 feet.

Such rugged, high-altitude terrain once might have buffered people living at low elevations from the effects of mine-water blowouts. But with population growth in a state that is a prime vacation destination, people have been moving to ever-higher elevations.

What wasn't a problem in the past is becoming a problem now because of the increased use of mountain water," Williams says.

Dealing with contaminated water in abandoned mines is challenging for several reasons.

Alpine hydrology dictates that snowmelt and other forms of surface water will find their way into abandoned mine shafts, where cave-ins can set up dams.

And so many mines have punctured mountainsides that trying to establish a mountain's natural plumbing system, in hopes of perhaps diverting water from entering the mines, can be daunting.

The most effective way to deal with the problem at the moment is to treat the water at the mine, then release it to flow through the watershed. But that can cost between \$500,000 to \$1 million

per mine per year, essentially forever.

Politics and public relations also can impede clean-up.

Four years ago, the EPA noted that a group of mines along the upper reaches of Cement Creek were collectively leaking enough contaminated water to qualify as a Superfund site. This would have opened federal coffers to help pay for remediation. But the notion ran into stiff local opposition, in no small part because many people worried that the Superfund label would send tourists elsewhere.

With the current blow-out at Gold King Mine, it's quite likely "that ship has sailed," notes Ms. Kohler.

She notes that this debacle and the broader problem it highlights could encourage support for federal legislation that protects so-called good Samaritans from liability during efforts to clean up old mining sites. These would include nonprofit groups who might want to help undertake cleanup efforts, but who have been discouraged by the EPA with warnings that, in essence, said, "you didn't break it, but you're going to own it," if something goes wrong during remediation efforts, Kohler says.

Concerted efforts to clean up mine contamination can pay dividends, she adds.

For years, the Arkansas River was in tough shape, fouled by mining activities around Leadville, Colo., near the river's headwaters, she explains. Trout were virtually absent from long stretches of river that once teemed with them.

In January 2014, after 20 years of clean-up work, the state designated 102 miles of the river as Gold Medal Waters, where fishing and kayaking once again can flourish.

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CNN

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/10/us/epa-river-spill-residents/>

EPA spill: 'We looked at the river and we cried'

By Dana Ford and Ed Payne, CNN

August 11, 9:03 AM

(CNN)From his backyard in Durango, Colorado, Tom Bartles can see the Animas River, which was stained an unnatural orange.

The Environmental Protection Agency accidentally released millions of gallons of pollutants into the water last week, turning the typically blue water to the color of mustard.

"Everybody in town knew it was coming. It was hard to wake up in the morning and see an orange river," Bartles told CNN. "Many of the locals in this region are probably going to experience a certain level of mourning."

By Tuesday, the plume of heavy metals had largely moved on and the river looked clear. A tourist probably wouldn't notice anything was off, but a local would know it's not quite right, Bartles said.

And for him, the biggest concern wasn't the immediate threat anyway; it's the spill's potential long-term and cumulative impact.

"This is a major, major problem," said Jonathan Freedman, a toxicologist at the University of Louisville.

Typically it takes years or even decades for health problems from metals to develop.

'We all share this crisis'

Officials said they believe the spill carried metals like iron, zinc and copper into a creek that feeds into the Animas.

It caused a spike in concentrations of total and dissolved metals in the water, the EPA said. It's unclear exactly what effect that will have.

"It's all questions at this point and very few answers," said Bartles, who described the Animas as the "heartbeat of the community."

A lot of people depend on the river for water, recreation, fishing and farming -- not just in Durango, but up and down the waterway.

"We all share this crisis no matter where we live," said Bartles. "And we all have to take responsibility."

In neighboring New Mexico, the heartbreak of the spill was just as real as the toxic mix moved on.

"We came out here together, and we looked at the river and we cried," Rosemary Hart told CNN affiliate KRQE.

She lives on the Animas and her family depends on a well to get water. The spill has made the water unusable, she said.

"My first concern is the next generations, and what they're walking into," Hart told KRQE.

The U.S. Geological Survey reported the size of the spill to be more than 3 million gallons, compared with the initial EPA estimate of 1 million gallons.

Gov. Susana Martinez has declared a state of emergency.

According to the EPA, the spill occurred when one of its teams was using heavy equipment to enter the Gold King Mine, a suspended mine north of Durango. Instead of entering the mine and beginning the process of pumping and treating the contaminated water inside as planned, the team accidentally caused it to flow into the nearby Animas.

Getting answers from the EPA is critical, according to Doris Stock, who lives along the river.

"We could lose our animals. It could damage our crops. It'll destroy the soil," she told KRQE.

Few answers

Residents are looking for answers, but the EPA has few to offer at this point.

More than 300 people attended an informational meeting at the Farmington, New Mexico, Civic Center on Monday night.

"Over the next few days, the waters in the river are going to clear up," said Jeff Witte, New Mexico's agriculture secretary. "That's doesn't mean they're safe folks."

Mark Hayes of the EPA reminded residents not to use the water until they get an all clear. When that will be, officials don't know.

The dangers

According to the EPA, last Wednesday's spill caused a spike in metal concentrations, but levels "began to return to pre-event conditions" by Thursday.

However, according to the EPA's own data, there were still very high levels of metals on Thursday. An arsenic sample tested 26 times higher than the EPA acceptable level.

Lead was even worse -- much worse.

"Oh my God! Look at the lead!" said Joseph Landolph, a toxicologist at the University of Southern California, pointing to a lead level in the Animas River nearly 12,000 times higher than the acceptable level set by the EPA.

And one thing is for sure: these metals don't disappear. Even if they go down to low levels in the water, they will likely be in the sediment and could be kicked up into the water at any time.

"This was such a horrible accident," Landolph said. "I served on the EPA scientific advisory board, and I have the utmost respect for the agency. I wish them Godspeed in cleaning it up and containing it."

'We'll weather it'

Among those most hurting from the spill are businesses that depend on the Animas day to day.

Andy Corra is an owner of the Durango-based 4Corners Riversports, which has a sister company

called 4Corners Whitewater.

"The river is basically closed so that shuts down all the rafting," he said. "They're losing all their revenue."

On good days, he said, that could be as much as \$10,000 a day.

"One day business is booming, and the next day, boom, it's shut off," said Corra. "It's a huge bummer for the whole industry."

He's been in Durango for 35 years and loves it. He called the city a paradise and, without exaggeration, the greatest place in the world.

"We'll weather it. There's a bigger concern for the river, but the river will weather it as well," said Corra.

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The Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/11/colorado-animas-river-spill-mine-toxic-waste-epa>

Confusion plagues EPA response to toxic Colorado mining spill it caused

Caty Enders

August 11, 8:30AM EDT

Six days after a burst plug shot 3m gallons of toxic mining waste from Gold King Mine into Colorado's Animas River, communities in three states are increasingly frustrated that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) hasn't explained the environmental and health impacts of the spill.

"For whatever reason, their communications continue to be insufficient," said Durango-based San Juan Citizens Alliance executive director Dan Olson. "They're sowing more confusion in the community than they are resolving it."

A slurry of mercury, arsenic and lead that continues to flow from the disused mine at 550 gallons per minute is expected to keep communities in Colorado, New Mexico and Utah from accessing water until at least 17 August, when the EPA says it hopes to have more information about what exactly is in it.

The federal agency downplayed the short-term impacts on Sunday, when EPA toxicologist Deborah McKean was quoted as saying that the plume would not have "caused significant health effects" to animals. The federal agency is being blamed for the release, which happened during an attempt to clean up mining waste, and has yet to be explained by federal officials.

Olson responded that, while Durango wasn't seeing immediate wildlife die-offs, the long-term health and environmental effects were impossible to assess: "What's being reported is that there has been little to no discernible fish mortality. No one should extrapolate that there is no impact to fisheries. The reality is: no one knows what the impacts will be."

As the plume of toxic water moved its way towards Lake Powell, at the mouth of the Colorado River, bewilderment as to how to interpret the dangers remained prominent.

On Monday morning, residents of Bluff, Utah, reported a slight orange tint in the San Juan river, about 150 miles downriver from Durango. The Bureau of Land Management, however, had not closed the river to recreational boating, according to San Juan County community development planner Charlie Delorme.

“Utah’s division of environmental quality is out sampling right now,” said Delorme, who noted that the small town of Bluff is highly dependent on tourism at this time of year. “We just don’t have hard numbers right now.”

Further downriver, officials at the Glen Canyon National Recreation Area had little information to offer visitors, other than to avoid the arm of the lake flowing from the mouth of the San Juan. That stretch of lake, as of Monday, was closed to fishing, swimming and boating until further notice.

Park ranger and public information officer Cynthia Sequanna said sediment from the toxic plume would hopefully settle in the delta at the entrance to Lake Powell, but that the short- and long-term impacts are unknown at this point. She was unable to say when the toxins might reach the lake. “I don’t know exactly where it’s at,” said Sequanna on Monday afternoon. “I believe it has reached Farmington.”

The city of Farmington, New Mexico, which received the first of the plume on Saturday morning, has now turned from bright orange to brown, and community leaders announced Sunday that a temporary water supply for residents would last 90 days.

Colorado’s Animas watershed has long suffered damage from 5,400 historic mining sites, 80 of which actively contribute substantial toxic metals. The river has a diminished fish population as a result.

The rivers further downstream, in New Mexico and Utah, however, were relatively pristine before the accident, according to Jen Pelz, of the the conservation group Wildearth Guardian.

“The San Juan river actually has a lot of diversity and so does the Colorado River [even further downstream]. And I don’t think anyone knows how bad this can be,” said Pelz, who acts as the New Mexico non-profit’s Wild Rivers Program Director. “There are going to be impacts right now and there will probably be long-term impacts.”

Many critics of the EPA's response have pointed to the lack of cooperation between agencies in dealing with environmental fallout that will span at least three states and the sovereign Navajo Nation.

On Monday, EPA officials announced on a conference call that the organization was moving to address a lack of communication, setting up a command center to coordinate operations.

Joan Card, an adviser to the EPA, announced that no public water systems were affected in Utah and that a total of four were closed in Colorado and New Mexico.

As if to demonstrate the disorder plaguing the agency's response, Ron Curry, a New Mexico EPA administrator jumped in to correct Card, saying that five public water systems were closed in New Mexico alone.

Jared Blumenfeld, an EPA administrator covering the Navajo Nation Area, was unable to say what sort of impact the plume might have on Lake Powell. "We have received some calls from California," which draws water from the Colorado River, wondering if there will be impacts for the drought-stricken state. "We've reached out to the Bureau of Reclamation, who has jurisdiction over Lake Powell," and they are soon to begin testing, said Blumenfeld.

The EPA said that it still had not identified how many thousands of individuals or wells might have been affected.

At a somber crisis meeting of the Navajo Nation Council on Monday, delegates with their stetsons on the table aired their concerns. Representatives from tribal communities all along the San Juan river spoke of a new era, where water could not be taken for granted. They mentioned previous radioactive and heavy metal contamination from historic mining throughout their rivers. Some hinted at a reconsideration of the extensive corporate mining ventures contracted on their 27,000-square-mile territory.

Also at the meeting was New Mexico environment secretary, Ryan Flynn, who said he was prepared to help the Navajo Nation with their announced lawsuit against the EPA. "I'm willing

to fight them, I plan to fight them – I promise, I will stand side by side with you,” said Flynn, who said he was fed up with what he saw as deliberate misinformation from the federal agency. “The first summary of data they provided us was misleading,” he noted, saying it was presented in a way that attempted to “spin” the truth.

Flynn said that he distrusted the EPA to the extent that the state is ordering its own water testing from the San Juan.

Tom Chee, a delegate from Shiprock, pleaded for cooperation from state representatives to answer immediate concerns about water shortages.

Chee pointed out that the Navajo Nation, which stretches across three states, was being told by the EPA to withhold water from livestock and crops in the midst of one of the hottest months of the year. “We’re right in the middle of farm season, and we need answers as quickly as possible to say: this is the time to release the water,” said Chee. “We’ll worry about lawsuit later on. The real answer is how do we address the cries of our elders and get the water back to its normal use.”

He urged that thoughts of a lawsuit should be put aside by tribal leaders while they focus on cooperation with other communities and the concerns of the people living along the river. “I think water transcends cultural barriers, language, belief systems,” Chee said. “I have heard two days of weeping from our elders: what if this problem persists? What if our river dies? There goes our culture, our language. You cannot put monetary value on a way of life.”

Inquisitr

<http://www.inquisitr.com/2326137/silverton-colorado-toxic-spill/>

Silverton, Colorado: State Of Emergency Declared Following Massive Toxic Spill [Video]

Citizens of Silverton, Colorado were treated to a horrific sight last week as a huge toxic spill from an old mine turned the Animas River bright orange. A whopping three million gallons of toxic waste spilled into the Silverton waterways in a stream estimated to be 100 miles long.

What began as an attempt by the Environmental Protection Agency to protect the people of Silverton from the harm of the old abandoned Gold King Mine turned disastrous as they inadvertently released toxic sludge into the Silverton waterways. Originally estimated at one million gallons, the spill into Silverton has since been reevaluated at three million gallons.

The toxic sludge contains arsenic, lead, and other potentially harmful heavy metals. According to ABC News, Colorado governor John Hickenlooper says this type of spill could happen again, and he plans to do everything in his power to clean out the old mines and keep Silverton and surrounding areas safe.

“We are aware that there are a number of old mines that have water dams like, similar to this, and we’re going to go back through them. People think about Colorado for our skies and our landscapes and our rushing rivers. They don’t want those rivers to be orange.”

Silverton, Colorado, is not the only area, or state, affected by the toxic spill. The Los Angeles Times reports the Environmental Protection Agency has stated no immediate health threats are expected, as the sludge is moving very rapidly and is also diluted by the large river. However, that also means the sludge is moving into New Mexico and, potentially, Utah.

The Navajo Nation, which spans areas in New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona, declared a state of emergency and stopped using water from the San Juan river.

According to KRQE News, New Mexico governor Susana Martinez has also declared a state of

emergency. She plans to use the additional state funding to support response teams, test water wells, and study long term effects of the sludge.

So far, the Los Angeles Times further reported, the wildlife in Silverton, Colorado have not seemed to suffer any issues due to the toxic mine sludge. A Colorado environmental group studied flies exposed to the Silverton water and did not note any unusual symptoms.

The following video shows an aerial view of the orange river. It is almost unfathomable.

Colorado governor declares state of emergency due to wastewater spill

Silverton is just the beginning of the path the toxic fluid will take during its journey. How long will the water remain orange? How many states will be affected? Will the animals of Silverton continue to show little to no issues from exposure to the contaminated water? These questions are yet to be answered.

NBC News

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/colorado-mine-spill-toxic-wastewater-leak-far-exceeds-first-estimates-n407091>

State of Emergency: Colorado Wastewater Leak Far Exceeds First Estimates

Erin McClam

August 10, 7:20 PM ET

Gov. John Hickenlooper of Colorado declared a state of emergency on Monday, five days after a

spill that sent toxic water seeping from an abandoned gold mine and turned a river orange.

The Environmental Protection Agency said Sunday that 3 million gallons of wastewater had spilled, three times as much as earlier estimates, and that health risks to humans and aquatic life were not yet clear.

Hickenlooper said the disaster declaration would allow him to use \$500,000 from the state's disaster fund to pay for the response. Some of the money will go toward towns and businesses hurt by the spill.

"We will work closely with the EPA to continue to measure water quality as it returns to normal, but also to work together to assess other mines throughout the state to make sure this doesn't happen again," the governor said in a statement.

On Wednesday, an EPA-supervised cleanup crew accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the Gold King Mine, shuttered since 1923, sending a yellow-orange sludge leaking into the Animas River.

Water collected downstream showed higher than normal levels of arsenic, lead and other metals. In Durango, Colorado, the mayor assured people the water was safe to drink because the city shut off its intake valve from the Animas.

Still, "the river for us is an integral part of our community," state Sen. Ellen Roberts, who represents Durango, told MSNBC on Monday. "It's where people get married. People do their own private ceremonies along there. It's our daily life."

The discolored water reached New Mexico and was headed for Utah. Authorities there were planning to shut two wells that serve the town of Montezuma Creek. A tank of residential water in Halchita, Utah, was filled with water shipped from Arizona.

NBC News

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<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/colorado-river-spill-early-tests-show-little-threat-fish-wildlife-n407586>

Colorado River Spill: Early Tests Show Little Threat to Fish, Wildlife

M. Alex Johnson

Aug 11, 8:47 AM ET

Toxic spill in Colorado's Animas River 3 times larger than reported 2:23

Preliminary tests on the once-toxically orange Animas River in Colorado indicate little danger to fish or other wildlife, authorities said Monday, five days after a spill sent contaminated water seeping into the river.

Gov. John Hickenlooper declared a state of emergency after the Environmental Protection Agency said Sunday that 3 million gallons of wastewater had spilled, three times as much as earlier estimates. The declaration will allow Hickenlooper to spend half a million dollars from the state's disaster fund on the incident.

The river flowed bright orange in the days after a cleanup crew supervised by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the Gold King Mine on Wednesday, sending a yellow-orange sludge leaking into the Animas River. Water collected downstream showed higher-than-normal levels of arsenic, lead and other metals.

By Monday, cleanup efforts had left many parts of the river clearer, with a greenish hue.

Local authorities said drinking water was safe because they'd shut off intake valves from the

Animas, and Monday, the state Parks and Wildlife Department said results of five days of tests found "no evidence" of adverse effects on fish and wildlife along the river corridor.

The parks agency said it embedded trout fingerlings in cages along sections of the river on Thursday so it could monitor the water's impact. Monday, all but one of the 116 fingerlings were still alive, and no dead fish had been spotted elsewhere along the river, it said.

"A visit this afternoon found all lively little fish," the La Plata County government said in announcing the state results, adding: "Biologists have also walked and floated parts of the river looking for evidence of dead fish. No dead fish were found and there is no evidence of scavenging by other animals."

The EPA said Monday it was listing the spill as a top priority under the Superfund program to allow for a more extensive cleanup effort.

The discolored water has already reached New Mexico. New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez also declared a state of emergency Monday, saying she plans "to hold EPA accountable for this."

The next likely destination for the contaminated water is Utah, where state environmental quality officials said they expect to have test results from a stretch of the San Juan River by Tuesday.

"We're kind of in a wait-and-see mode right now," Donna Spangler, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Environmental Quality, told NBC station KSL of Salt Lake City.

Shaun McGrath, director of the EPA's Region 8, told NBC station KOB of Albuquerque that the agency would conduct a separate independent investigation to see what happened.

"We'll look back and we'll be taking steps in the future to ensure that we avoid these kinds of events," he said.

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NBC News

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/toxic-colorado-mine-spill-black-eye-epa-n407746>

Toxic Colorado Mine Spill a Black Eye for EPA

By Tony Dokoupil

Aug 11, 2015, 8:24 AM ET

For almost a week, a torrent of toxic sludge — the color of hot mustard and rife with poisonous metals — has been flowing through Colorado, Utah and New Mexico. On Monday, the governor of Colorado declared a belated state of emergency, as officials announced that the popular Animas River would remain closed until at least Aug. 17.

The Environmental Protection Agency was on the scene faster than usual, containing the spill and starting the cleanup process. That's the good news. The bad news is that the EPA caused the spill in the first place.

"We've launched an independent investigation to see what happened, and we'll be taking steps to ensure that something like this doesn't happen again," Shaun McGrath, the EPA administrator in charge of the region, told reporters on Monday.

At a public meeting on Friday, David Ostrander, the EPA's regional director of emergency preparedness, struck an even more contrite tone. "It's hard being on the other side of this," he said. "We typically respond to emergencies. We don't cause them."

The spill is a costly and ill-timed error for Mother Nature's premier federal defender. By law, the

agency has to pay off people who suffered personal injury or property damage as a result of governmental actions, and there's likely to be a number of those claims.

On Wednesday morning, the EPA now admits, more than 3 million gallons of errant goo slid out of a dormant gold mine and into the Animas River. That's three times as much as original estimates.

But the appearance of incompetence is likely to make this spill a political headache, too. It comes as the agency is already under broad attack for its role as the muscle behind President Barack Obama's Clean Power Plan, and, indeed, much of the administration's broader plan to combat global warming.

So far, the EPA has said very little about the cause of the spill, and it declined msnbc's request for additional comment. Officials acknowledged that the spill was triggered while an EPA-supervised crew was working near Silverton, Colorado, in the southwest part of the state.

Fluid from inside the Gold King Mine, shuttered since 1923, has been leaching into the surrounding area. That mine alone was a slow motion disaster, in the EPA's opinion, and the area is shot through with dozens of similarly toxic wells. It's so bad that the EPA has tried to declare the area a Superfund site — clearing the way for an ambitious cleanup.

But after local opposition, the agency opted for a more modest, incremental plan. A crew would slurp out the worst pools of sludge and dispose of them properly. That was the goal near Silverton when heavy equipment somehow disturbed an earthen wall that secured the liquid, releasing an up to 80-mile ribbon of pollution downstream.

The extent of the damage was still unknown late Monday. The orange color had dissipated, but it left behind layers of sludge in some places and a plume of toxins still cruising downriver. The most worrisome pollutants are arsenic and lead, which respectively peaked at 300 times and 3,500 times the normal levels, according to EPA test results released on Friday.

In nearby Durango, Colorado, the mayor assured people that the water was safe to drink because

the city shut off its intake valve from the Animas. But farmers, tribal leaders and municipal officials elsewhere closed wells and switched thousands of residents to alternative sources of water as a precaution.

Seven water systems in New Mexico and Colorado have been affected, officials said, and the Animas River ultimately connects with the Colorado River — a source of drinking water for much of the West.

The less calculable costs, of course, are all psychological. The beauty of the Animas River was the backdrop for parts of the film "Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid," and thousands of tourists ride down it on kayaks or paddle boards every year.

"The river for us is an integral part of our community," state Sen. Ellen Roberts, who represents Durango, told msnbc on Monday. "It's where people get married. People do their own private ceremonies along there. It's our daily life."

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/11/us/durango-colorado-mine-spill-environmental-protection-agency.html>

Environmental Agency Uncorks Its Own Toxic Water Spill at Colorado Mine

By Julie Turkewitz

Aug 10, 2015

DURANGO, Colo. — The Animas River is the cultural soul of this patch of southwestern Colorado, a sort of moving Main Street that hosts multiple floating parades a year and is typically bustling with rafters and kayakers. Schoolchildren study the river. Sweethearts marry on its banks. Its former name, given by Spaniards, is el Río de las Ánimas, the River of Souls.

But since Wednesday, the Animas has been grievously polluted with toxic water spilled from one of the many abandoned mines that pockmark the region — a spill for which the Environmental Protection Agency has claimed responsibility, saying it accidentally breached a store of chemical-laced water.

On Sunday, anger over the spill boiled over after the agency announced that the amount of toxic water released was three times what was previously stated — more than three million gallons rather than one million — and that officials were still unsure if there was a health threat to humans or animals.

People kayak in the Animas River near Durango, Colo., in water colored from a mine waste spill. Wastewater Spill in Colorado Turns a River Yellow AUG. 7, 2015

The day of that announcement, State Senator Ellen Roberts, a Republican who lives near the river, cried softly as she considered the pollution, adding that she had dropped her father's ashes in the depths of the river, which pollutants had turned into an unnatural-looking yellow-orange ribbon.

Scott Roberts, an aquatic biologist with Mountain Studies Institute, collecting insects from the Animas River on Sunday, to check on their health. Credit Jerry McBride/The Durango Herald, via Associated Press

"It is not just a scenic destination," Ms. Roberts said. "It is where people literally raise their children. It is where the farmers and ranchers feed their livestock, which in turn feeds the people. We're isolated from Denver through the mountains, and we are pretty resourceful people. But if you take away our water supply, we're left with virtually no way to move forward."

On Monday, Gov. John W. Hickenlooper released \$500,000 in funds for assistance. The City of Durango and La Plata County have declared states of emergency.

Soon after the spill was detected, city officials stopped pumping water from the Animas into the reservoir that provides drinking water for Durango's 17,000 residents — taking action swiftly enough that the contamination did not reach the drinking supply. The reservoir still receives water from the Florida River, a tributary of the Animas, but the city has asked local residents to

conserve so that the reservoir does not get too low.

Most people living outside the city use wells, and officials say about 1,000 residential water wells could be contaminated.

The river is closed indefinitely, and the county sheriff has hastily recast his campaign signs into posters warning river visitors to stay out of the water. The yellow plume has traveled down to New Mexico — where officials in several municipalities have stopped pumping river water into drinking water systems, fearing contamination — and to the Navajo Nation.

Testing by the E.P.A. — an agency typically in the position of responding to toxic disasters, not causing them — found that the wastewater spill caused levels of arsenic, lead and other metals to spike in the Animas River.

On the day of the accident, a team from the agency had been investigating an abandoned mine about 50 miles north of here. Called the Gold King, it is roughly 1.5 miles long and about 700 feet tall at its highest point. The mine had been abandoned for nearly a century, but between roughly 1890 and 1920 it produced 350,000 ounces of high-grade gold, according to its owner.

For years, the Gold King has leaked toxic water at a rate of 50 to 250 gallons a minute. The agency had planned to find the source of the leak in the hope of one day stanching it. Instead, as workers used a backhoe to hack at loose material, a surprise deluge of orange water ripped through, spilling into Cement Creek and flowing into the Animas. The burst did not injure workers.

In his first interview since the spill, the owner of the mine, Todd Hennis, said the spill was probably the fault of another mine company — the Sunnyside Gold Corporation — that had built retention walls inside an abandoned mine near the Gold King, part of an old cleanup agreement with the federal government. Once the Sunnyside mine filled with wastewater, the water probably spilled into the Gold King, and then into the Animas, Mr. Hennis said.

He urged Sunnyside's parent company, the Kinross Gold Corporation, to clean up the mess.

“They’ve got to step forward and be responsible,” he said of Kinross. A spokesman for Sunnyside, Larry Perino, said the company had no role in Gold King spill.

Since the 1870s, metal mining has both enriched and poisoned this region, turning the earth under portions of southwest Colorado into a maze of tunnels and leaving behind shuttered sites oozing with chemicals. There are about 200 abandoned mines in the Animas watershed. Sunnyside was the last to close, in 1991.

On Sunday night, residents packed a school auditorium in Durango for a meeting with the E.P.A.’s regional director, Shaun McGrath. During a public comment session that lasted more than two hours, residents flouted a sign on the wall that instructed the auditorium’s typical patrons — middle schoolers — to refrain from calling out, jumping up or insulting others during assemblies.

Shouts rang out. A few people cried. One resident questioned whether the agency had refashioned itself into the “Environmental Pollution Agency.” Others demanded to know what would happen to wildlife, livestock, water wells, sediment and river-based jobs.

“When — when can we be open again?” asked David Moler, 35, the owner of a river-rafting company who had approached a microphone. “All I hear is a handful of ‘gonna-dos,’ ” he added. “What should I tell my employees?”

Mr. McGrath and his colleagues urged patience and assured residents that they would provide information about health risks once they had it. The agency, he said, is awaiting test results to determine whether the water poses a risk.

“We’re going to continue to work until this is cleaned up,” Mr. McGrath said, “and hold ourselves to the same standards that we would anyone that would have created this situation.”

Reuters

Rivers hardest hit by Colorado mine waste spill to stay closed until Aug. 17

By Steve Gorman

Aug. 11, 2015 7:05 am EDT

Two rivers in Colorado and New Mexico hardest hit by contamination from toxic wastewater spilled from a defunct gold mine will remain closed to drinking water and irrigation intakes for at least another week, U.S. environmental officials said.

The San Juan River and its northern tributary, the Animas River, have been fouled by the release of more than 3 million gallons (11.3 million liters) of acid mine drainage inadvertently triggered by a team of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) workers last week.

The discharge has continued to flow at the rate of 500 gallons (1,900 liters) per minute from the site of the century-old Gold King Mine, near the town of Silverton in southwestern Colorado, into a stream below called Cement Creek.

The wastewater has then washed into the Animas River and into San Jan River in northwestern New Mexico.

The orange-tinged contamination plume, containing heavy metals such as arsenic, mercury and lead, has dissipated through dilution as it spreads downstream, with its leading edge no longer visible from aerial surveys, the EPA said.

However, experts say a long-term concern is the deposit of heavy metals from the spill that have settled into river sediments, where they can be churned up and unleash a new wave of pollution

when storms hit or rivers run at flood stage.

An unspecified number of residents who live downstream from the mine and draw their drinking supplies from private wells have reported water discoloration, but there has been no immediate evidence of harm to humans, livestock or wildlife, according to EPA officials.

Still, residents have been advised to avoid drinking or bathing in water drawn from wells in the vicinity.

Two Colorado municipalities, including the city of Durango, and the New Mexico towns of Aztec and Farmington have shut off their river intakes, the EPA said.

EPA officials said on Monday the Animas and San Juan rivers would remain closed until at least Aug. 17 to drinking, irrigation supply, fishing and boating as experts try to gauge safety risks posed by the spill.

Wastewater continues to pour from a tunnel wall accidentally breached by EPA crews last Wednesday but the concentration of heavy metals reaching local streams has diminished.

Emergency treatment of the effluent by diverting it into settling ponds before it empties into Cement Creek has reduced acidity and metal levels in the creek, the EPA said.

The creek's water quality was already badly degraded from a long history of acid mine drainage in the area, EPA officials acknowledge.

The conservation group American Rivers says Colorado has more than 4,000 abandoned mines, about 1,100 of them around Silverton, which it calls "ticking time bombs."

The Navajo Nation has also been affected. Its sprawling reservation is traversed by the San Juan River, which flows through southeastern Utah into Lake Powell. It was uncertain how far significant contamination from the spill would travel.

Time

<http://time.com/3991302/colorado-waste-water-spill/>

What The Colorado Waste Water Spill Tells Us About Mining Contamination

By Justin Worland

Aug. 10, 2015

Scientists grappled with the consequences of a spill of toxic wastewater on Monday, one day after the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reported that an accident had led to 3 million gallons of mining runoff flowing into a river in Colorado used for drinking water. But researchers who study water resources in the region say the spill, while significant on its own, is just the latest example of the much broader problem of water contamination from mining processes.

“In the Rocky Mountain area, acid rock and acid mine drainage is a major water quality problem,” said Diane McKnight, a professor civil, environmental and architectural engineering at the University of Colorado. “This is certainly an unfortunate event, but the impact of acid rock and acid rock drainage is well recognized and understood in Colorado.”

Acid drainage results when water flows through acidic minerals that have been exposed due to mining. Water that contains these minerals in high volumes becomes unsafe for drinking. Colorado alone has hundreds of mines that have created acid drainage—but rarely on the scale of last week’s incident.

Last week’s event was the result of an accident inadvertently caused by EPA workers looking

into reports that a mine was leaking contaminated water. During the process, loose material gave way and released millions of gallons of contaminated water, turning the Animas River orange and yielding it unusable for days. Water is still spilling into the river at a rate of 500 gallons per minute, though the EPA has set up a filtering system aimed at removing toxic elements, including copper, lead and manganese, according to regional EPA administrator Shaun McGrath. Still, officials urged local residents to await further tests, which should happen within the next few days, before using the water. The river has been temporarily disconnected from the public water supply.

The consequences of last week's incident could have lasting repercussions. Events like heavy rain and melting snow that disturb sediment settled at the bottom of the river may release some of the toxic minerals deposited there by the spill. If that happens, local officials will need a game plan to test the water and inform those who may be at risk, said Williams.

The spill has angered local residents, many of whom depend on the river for livestock and tourist businesses. Still, this is hardly the first mining wastewater spill in the area. Largely due to mine pollution, the water doesn't support a very robust ecosystem, though some organisms manage to live in it. "It's not correct to say these are lifeless streams," said McKnight. "There's certainly bacteria and some algae growing."

Ultimately, Williams says he hopes the incident raises awareness about the bigger problem of mines polluting waterways throughout the region. The technology exists, Williams says, and efforts by the EPA and other agencies to remediate toxic sites need to be funded fully.

"You hear about pollution, it doesn't really register," he said. "Then you see this blob of yellow running down the river."

TV Newsroom

<http://tvnewsroom.org/newslines/business/toxic-spill-expected-to-reach-lake-powell-this-week-79010/>

Toxic Spill Expected to Reach Lake Powell This Week

August 11, 2015

“Basically water can dissolve rocks that are in the mountains on the west slope and as those minerals dissolve and release into the stream, the heavy metals can cause lots of issues”, he said.

La Plata County, Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), EPA, and San Juan Basin Health are conducting sampling upon request of household wells.

Initial testing for heavy metals showed the levels may be high.

“There’s no question that they haven’t been taking this as seriously as the state has”, Flynn said.

State environmental quality officials expect to have test results Tuesday from a stretch of the San Juan River contaminated with waste from a Colorado mine.

The polluted waters were carried along the Animas River through Durango, Colo., and then flowed into the San Juan River at the confluence of the rivers in Farmington, N.M., on Saturday morning. Even if they go down to low levels in the water, they could likely be in the sediment and could be kicked up into the water at any time.

Going forward, it is also time to consider adding the Gold King mine to the Superfund list, which would spring more money as well as trigger a long-term cleanup plan, but which local communities have opposed. And they will also vary by river segments since the impact to the river system depends on their distance from the source of the contaminated mine. The river flows south and into the San Juan River in New Mexico and eventually to Lake Powell. “Right now

we're just canceling by the day", said Drew Beezley, co-owner of 4 Corners Whitewater in Durango, Colorado. Federal officials say all but one of a test batch of fingerling trout deliberately exposed to the water survived over the weekend. Lake Powell, where the river first enters Arizona, is located 250 miles further downstream.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) now says that three million gallons of wastewater spilled from an abandoned mine last week.

The spill happened at the Gold King Mine on Wednesday. He says he has no other resources.

Members of New Mexico's congressional delegation sent a letter to EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy, expressing concern over the failure of the agency to notify New Mexico sooner about the problem.

Experts estimate there are 55,000 such abandoned mines from Colorado to Idaho to California, and federal and state authorities have struggled to clean them for decades. For some, money is affected by the quality of water, as well.

"It's a pain", Hemmingson said of not being able to use the well water.

Gov. John Hickenlooper is expected to arrive in Durango on Tuesday to assess damage after contamination of the Animas River from runoff from the Gold King Mine blowout.

The mine has been inactive since 1923.

The bright orange toxic sludge has crossed the state border into New Mexico, reaching the New Mexico municipalities of Farmington, Aztec, and Kirtland.

Still, residents were advised to avoid drinking or bathing in water drawn from wells in the vicinity, and the government was arranging to supply water to homes and businesses in need.

Drinking water was being hauled to some communities.

The agency said it has deployed response teams to Durango and Silverton, Colorado, as well as northwest New Mexico and the Navajo Nation.

Wall Street Journal

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/colorado-pledges-funds-to-help-clean-up-gold-mines-sludge-spill-1439237643>

Colorado, New Mexico Free Up State Funds for Gold-Mine Spill

Dan Frosch

August 10, 7:07PM ET

The governors of Colorado and New Mexico declared emergencies Monday, freeing up state funds to help clean up a mine spill that sent an estimated three million gallons of toxic, mustard-hued sludge surging through the regional river system.

The announcements allocate \$500,000 in state money for Colorado and an additional \$750,000 for New Mexico, on top of \$500,000 disbursed Friday.

The spill occurred Wednesday after an Environmental Protection Agency cleanup crew accidentally triggered a breach in an abandoned gold mine, releasing a plume of contaminated water.

“I had the chance to see the spill with my own eyes. It is absolutely devastating, and I am heartbroken by this environmental catastrophe,” said New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez, a Republican, adding she was concerned about the EPA’s “lack of communication.”

The EPA has apologized for the accident, with one official calling it a tragedy. The agency also said it regretted a slow response that has drawn sharp criticism from officials and residents in Colorado and New Mexico.

The sludge, which flowed down the Animas River and emptied into the San Juan River in New Mexico, contains such contaminants as lead and arsenic from the Gold King Mine, north of Silverton, Colo., one of thousands of abandoned mines across the western U.S.

“Our priority remains to ensure public safety and minimize environmental impacts,” said Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper, a Democrat. “We will work closely with the EPA to continue to measure water quality as it returns to normal, but also to work together to assess other mines throughout the state to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

The EPA is working to determine the extent of the pollution, which has affected several public water systems in Colorado and New Mexico, federal officials said Monday.

Officials in Colorado’s La Plata County said the spill hadn’t affected drinking water in Durango, because the city had shut off its water intake from the Animas River before the spill had reached it. But over 1,000 local wells were at risk, they said. Leaders of the Navajo Nation, where many rely on well water, have also expressed concern the spill could affect drinking water there as the sludge wove its way downstream towards its reservation.

The EPA said Monday it didn’t expect to open up closed portions of the river until at least Aug. 17. The agency said it was sending dozens of staff to the affected area, which includes Utah, to help with the cleanup.

“We’re really ramping up our response here on the ground—in Durango, and more broadly across the whole area,” said Shaun McGrath, regional EPA administrator.

There were initial indications that the spill hadn’t immediately affected aquatic life as testing showed small insects in the river near Durango were alive after exposure to the contaminants.

Meanwhile, frustration and concern continued to mount in southwestern Colorado and northern New Mexico, where the late-summer river recreation season, a vital cog in local economies, had been effectively shut down. Officials emphasized that the spill’s effects remained uncertain, even as the water, tinged an eerie yellow, started to run clearer.

“I’ve been inundated with constituents calling me asking whether the water will ever be safe again,” said Gwen Lachelt, a La Plata County commissioner. “We are deeply concerned with water quality when we have a major rainstorm and during spring runoff due to the sediment deposited during the spill.”

Ms. Lachelt said county officials had asked the EPA to begin assessing the dangers posed by the abandoned mines in the area to the Animas and San Juan rivers.

“The real frustration is that we have no data,” said Peter Butler, co-coordinator for the Animas River Stakeholders Group, made up of local environmental organizations, along with mining companies and federal and state agencies. “The river is a big deal in Durango. And we don’t have any data about what was in the plume when it came through the town.”

In New Mexico, state officials said they were overwhelmed with calls from residents in rural San Juan County worried that their wells might be contaminated.

Allison Scott Majure, spokeswoman for New Mexico’s environment department, said there was concern that even after the plume passed through, contaminated sediment could seep into wells. The state was offering free well testing to residents in the Animas River floodplain, she said.

“We’re still feeling a bit frustrated with EPA,” she said. “They’ll have more of their team here for domestic well testing tomorrow. We could have used them today.”